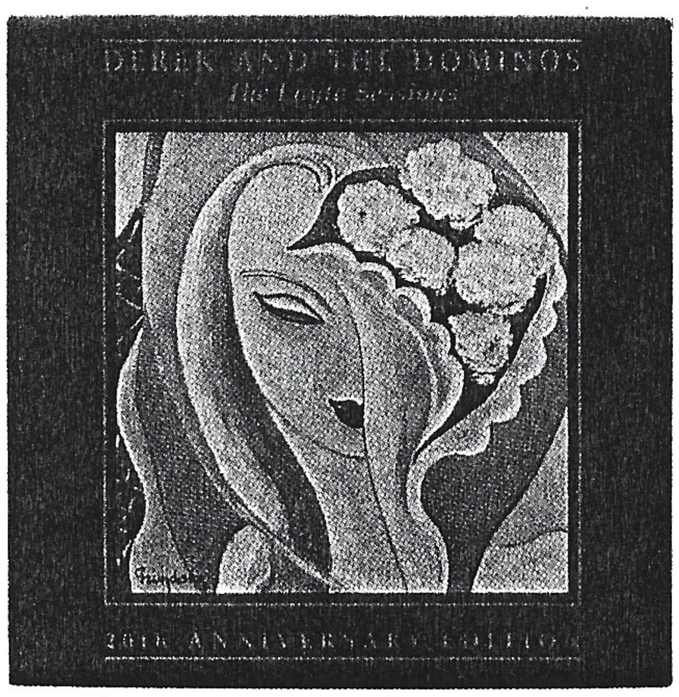
THE AUDIO
INTERVIEW

BILL LEVENSON

Danny McCue

Although he did pause long enough along the way to get a bachelor's degree in mathematics and to begin a career in systems engineering at IBM, PolyGram Records' Bill Levenson was destined for a career in recorded music.

It began with a passion for collecting records. While in his teens and 20s, it wasn't uncommon for Levenson to divide his paychecks between life's necessities and the latest 10 albums to hit the New York City record store racks. In 1980 his knowledge of both computers and music gave him entree into PolyGram's newly opened New York headquarters. By 1982 he was manager of A & R and later was named director of the same department.



But it wasn't until he co-created PolyGram's catalog development department that Levenson's rise up the corporate ladder became widely noticed in the music industry. Serving as both the department's director—a role in which he established PolyGram's Compact Disc reissue program—and its principal record producer, Levenson has overseen the ambitious and commercially successful retrospective compilations of Eric Clapton's *Crossroads*, the Allman Brothers Band's *Dreams*, and The Bee Gees' *Tales from The Brothers Gibb: A History in Song, 1967-1990, Chapters I-IV.*

Having won a Grammy for *Crossroads* in 1988, Levenson has once again delved into the Clapton *oeurve* for *The Layla Sessions: 20th Anniversary Edition.* This three-disc set, consisting of a remixed version of Derek and The Dominos' 1970 release *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*, a disc of alternate masters, and another of jams, is the subject of the following interview. Levenson's future projects will include Compact Disc chronicles of the careers of Hank Williams and James Brown. *D.McC.*

a sure hand for

PHOTOGRAPH:ROBERT LEWIS

slow hand

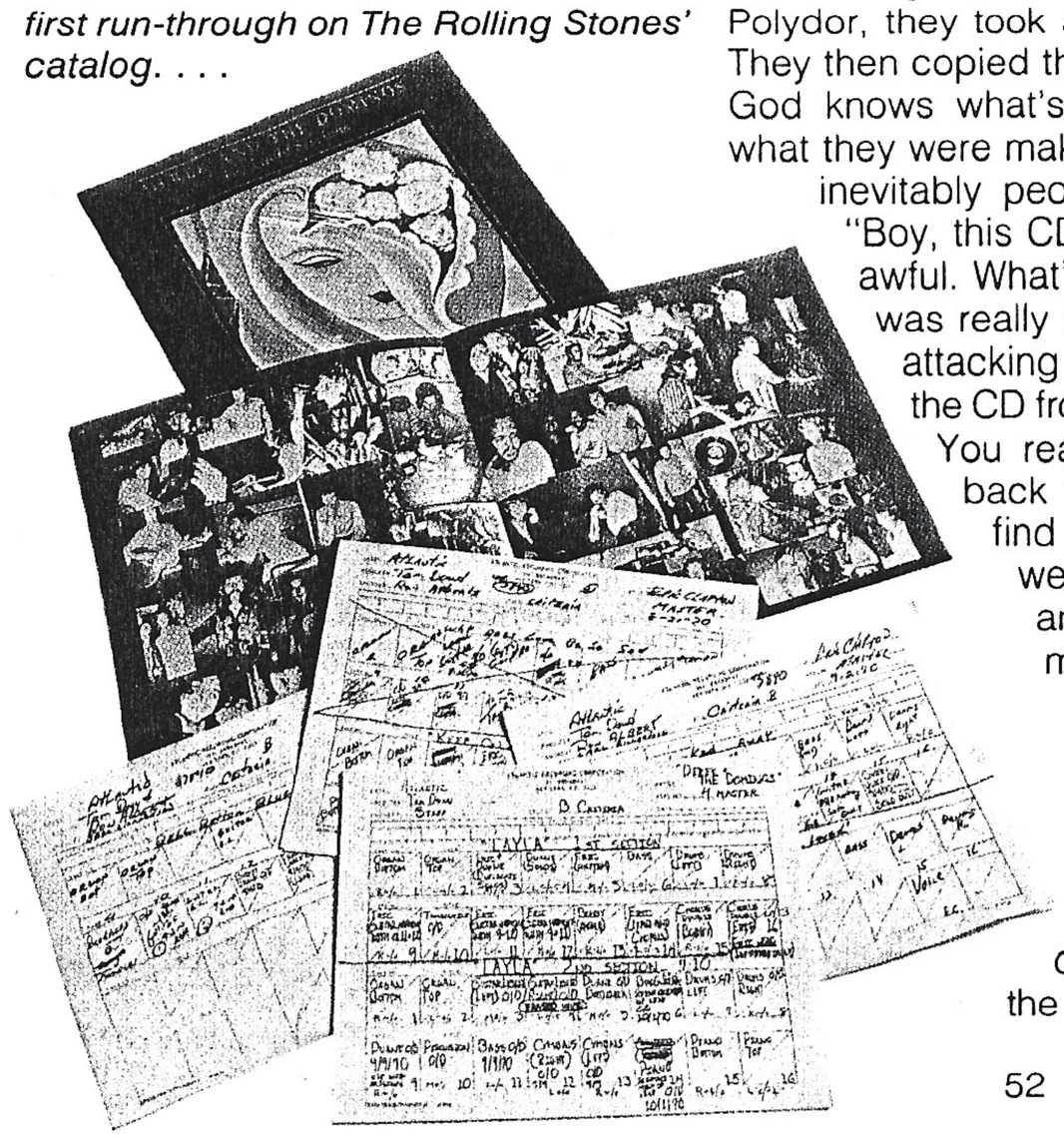
When putting together PolyGram's reissue program, what elements had to be put in place right away?

In any reissue program, you start by filling in the blanks in the catalog. If you have a line item that has an LP or cassette and no CD, that's where you start. Those are the easy ones. Plus you have to work closely with Business Affairs, because you can't just put a CD out; you have to go back to your contracts and see what your rights are. If your rights don't allow you to do another configuration, which is more often the case than not, then you have to go to the artist and get a CD agreement. That's why a lot of key artists were slow coming to the Compact Disc market.

Why would artists have in their contracts that you couldn't issue another format?

It's usually related to the royalty base. When CDs were introduced, they were very expensive to manufacture. Royalty bases are typically married to list price, and paying full royalty rates at list price wasn't really proper for that item at that time. So you needed a break from the artist to make it work. But things have changed. Now, when you sign an artist, that stuff is covered up front. In the past, though, each contract had its own ambiguities that you had to sort through.

There was a period when many record companies had to go back and redo their Compact Discs. Columbia's initial stab at Bruce Springsteen's Born To Run *comes to mind, as does Atlantic's first run-through on The Rolling Stones' catalog. . . .*



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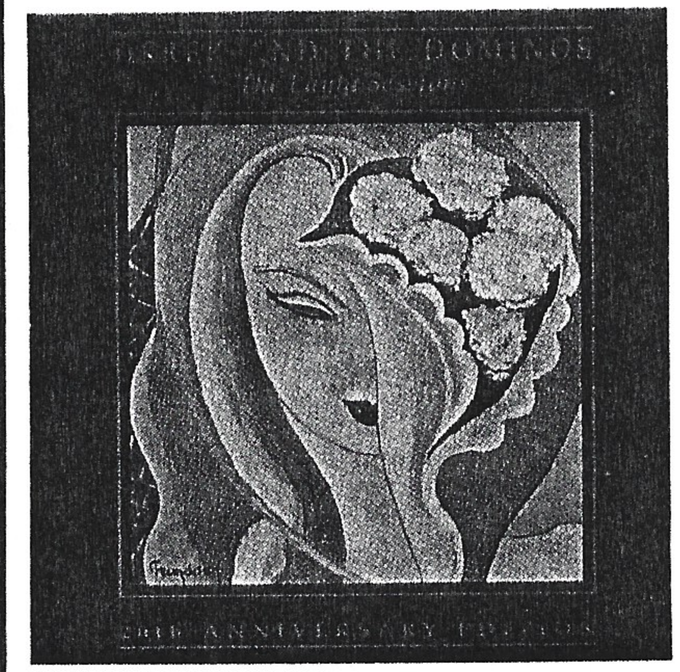
When remixing the album, we took the master and put it alongside the multi-track to match the speeds.



We had some of those too. Eric Clapton's *461 Ocean Boulevard* was one, *Moving Pictures* by Rush another, and Cream's *Disraeli Gears* was about the worst. The early PolyGram CDs were typically handled out of Germany, and they didn't have the basic premise down that you need a master tape. They were using copies of the master tape. And think about it; you're a German guy and you've got to get 10 discs out a month, you don't really know where tapes are stored, so you go to your tape library and see something that says "master" on it. Then you transfer it to disc. What was occurring was that you were winding up sometimes with a fifth-generation tape.

Disraeli Gears was recorded in Atlantic Studios in New York. Atlantic kept the master copy, and when the Robert Stigwood Organization went to Polydor, they took a production copy. They then copied that for Germany, so God knows what's in Europe. That's what they were making CDs from, and inevitably people began saying, "Boy, this CD stuff sounds God awful. What's the deal?" And it was really a case of someone attacking the mastering of the CD from the wrong angle. You really do have to go back to the source and find the master tape. If we've resolved to do anything here, it's to make every effort to track down a master tape. It's a very simple but time-consuming process because the tape can be anywhere—the artist can have it, or the producer, or the manager, or the record company. If the record company has changed hands, you've got to chase that through. I was lucky with Eric Clapton because I got legal clearance to walk into Atlantic Records' library, and everything I ever looked for was pretty much there. And if it wasn't there, it was at Island Records, as was the case with the Blind Faith stuff, or it was overseas in some RSO vault that no one knew to look in. We had to search and search. And as we've tracked down tapes over the years, we've upgraded, so that the *Disraeli Gears* you buy now is a zillion times better than you might have bought or heard seven years ago. Ditto *461 Ocean Boulevard*.

Nipping and tucking has a long history. Didn't* the album Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East *have a lot of edits in it?

There's actually two versions of *At Fillmore East*, the stereo and the quadraphonic, which are two very different records. On the stereo one, they obviously worked very diligently. They nipped and tucked, and some of the songs on that version are composites of multiple performances. If you listen to the quad version, you'll see that there are different things happening in the same song. What happened was, when the quad thing came along, people rushed out to do quad mixes and didn't have the same wherewithal to follow the same pattern. So they took the best choice, the best performance, and mixed it down to quad. The difference is really apparent on "Stormy Monday Blues," because there's a long harmonica solo on the quad version that doesn't appear on the stereo one. The intro to "Statesboro Blues" is different.

The version of "Crossroads" that we all know and love Clapton for was cut down also, wasn't it?

I don't know the true answer to that. All I know is that the master tape we have of Cream's *Wheels of Fire* shows edit points. The edits we have could be EQ points, where they equalized differently and then put it back together. We thought for a while that it was edited down, but we're not quite sure anymore. It's hard to say.

Did Columbia's boxed presentation of Bob Dylan's Biograph *give you the freedom to say, "Let's do a boxed set of one of our artists"?*

It brought the idea to us. It was a precedent. I probably got *Crossroads* done because I wasn't integrated into the A & R department. If I had been, management would probably have been horrified. "You're going to spend $100,000 on a catalog item? You're going to pay Ron Wood 10 grand to design a cover? Are you crazy?" The fact that I did it quietly, that I spent money quietly, and that I picked the right artist probably helped me get away with it.

And, you know, even as we went to market, we were looking at it and saying, "It's a bit extravagant, we'll recoup it with 20,000 units, so maybe we'll sell 25 or 50 thousand." That was sort of how we went out with it. I talked to the press, radio got their copies, and the thing exploded. All the right elements were there.

What portions of the collection would you change now, if you could?

I underplayed the Derek and The Dominos thing. I did "Mean Old World" and "Layla," which was good, but I probably should have put "Little Wing" or something else from *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs* on it. You could toss a coin, there are so many good songs on that album. I didn't need two live tracks. I should have had two more studio tracks. We found the multitracks far too late to spend a whole lot of time mixing and remixing, and I didn't want to use the tracks off of the two-track because they just sounded dreadful.

The other area is John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. I have a live track—it's "Have You Ever Loved a Woman," if I remember correctly—but I could've taken that six minutes and presented the three pre-Decca singles on the Immediate label. The problem was, nobody knew where they were, and I just ran out of time.

Did any of the feedback that you got for Crossroads *influence how you approached* The Layla Sessions?

Yes. I took a lot of shit from audiophiles on the remix of "Layla." A lot of people felt it was too bright, that it wasn't authentic, etcetera, and I took that to heart. In retrospect, it's not as bad as they said, but there is a mistake on the remix which we only discovered when we started to do it again.

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Two of the many faces of Eric Clapton. Above: Around the time of Blind Faith in 1969. Right: Derek and the Dominos in 1970. Pictured are Jim Gordon, Carl Radle, Bobby Whitlock, Clapton, and Jeep. (Duane Allman is not in this photo.)

The intent when doing the remix on this album was to do it as authentically as possible, and what that meant was to pay more attention to tape speed. When we remixed "Layla" the first time, we were aware that the speed was slow. When they cut it the first time, they actually sped it up. We had matched the front end, and there was a 3% difference. What we didn't realize is that they sped it up twice more during the song—3% at the intro, 4% at the piano, and 5% at the tail end. On *Crossroads*, we only had the 3% speedup throughout. It's a mistake. It actually kicks in twice more. When we did the remix of the album, we actually took the master tape and put it alongside the multi-tracks so we could match the speeds, because we had to make sure we were in sync at all times.

Was this done to get the timing on "Layla," or for each and every track?

Every track. And we not only timed the tracks but also the spirals between the tracks, so that when you put this on, other than the fact that it's a better mix that offers a few surprises, you're listening to the same record. It's just a helluva lot better. We didn't make it a 1990s recording, we made it an optimum 1970s recording.

What was wrong with it, tape degeneration or things that were done in 1970?

Things that were done. For instance,

when mixing the original album, they put the bass hard left. It's an old concept: Place everything on one side or the other. And for some reason, the bass was always hard left. No one puts the bass hard left anymore, for technical reasons. When cutting records, the bass is best in the center. So the first thing that Steve Rinkoff, the principal engineer on the project, decided was that the bass was going to be centered. After that, your whole plan changed; once you moved the bass, you had to move things around a bit. The other thing that was done was things were widened so that there's more stereo spread. Back in 1970, they kept the stereo image very narrow, and over time we've learned to use the whole 180°. After we worked on those two parameters, everything else fell into place.

What they did in 1970 was, they mixed down to a slower speed—possibly to 7½ ips but maybe 15. Right away you've got a noise problem because your tape is running slower. They also didn't use Dolby NR, which made it worse. Since all the tracks were sped up in different degrees, they had to copy it over. So they took the 7½ ips on "Layla" and said, "Let's transfer to another tape"—non-Dolby, mind you—"and let's speed this up 3% here, 4% here, and 5% here. Man, that sounds great. Fine. Save it." So they were transferring, making a second-generation tape, and either that became the master or, once they had a composite reel of all this varied speed stuff, they made another transfer and marked that "master." That wasn't unusual in 1970. This was how you worked, from analog to analog, and it didn't matter if you were building up generations of tape because it was only a record. You cut it, and you probably rolled off the top end if hiss was a problem. So here we are in 1990 with a 16-track master tape and we know in advance what they were doing, so let's do it right, in digital, as we go along, and never incur another second generation. And if there is another generation, it is a digital generation. Ultimately we saved three generations, and most of the hiss has gone away. The only hiss that remains is the hiss that went down when they recorded the musicians in the first place. They didn't have all the Dolby stuff we have now.

What criteria did you use to choose what would be included on The Jams ***disc in the*** Layla ***package?***

Basically we said we were going to use everything, and it just worked out that we could. The only thing we did was, when we mastered it, it came out to 83 minutes and technically a CD can only hold 77, so we nipped and tucked. Some things needed it, such as bum notes, as any jam would have. The intros stayed in because that's how the multi-tracks are. The musicians were jamming and someone said, "Hey, that's cookin', hit the button." So they'd pick it up in midstream. That's why "Key to the Highway" fades in, because that was impromptu.

What warranted being included on the Alternate Masters ***disc and what didn't?***

Everything made it. Or rather, I should say, everything that was saved. I'm sure there's stuff that they scrapped that I don't have. Where we got down to whether we were going to let something go or not was on something called "Tender Love." In essence, it's a basic rhythm track, and we thought, we've come this far, what's another four minutes? So for the person who has to have everything, you now have "Tender Love" also. Eric listened to it and understands that. It was one of the first tracks they cut; they abandoned it because it wasn't working. The booklet has dates in it and this track is labelled as incomplete, but this is what went on for those two or three weeks.

Was it easy, in the end, to say, "Okay, this is finished, put it in the box"?

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BILL LEVENISON

We couldn't make a 1990s recording out of *The Layla Sessions*, so we made it an optimum 1970s recording.

It's never easy to get to that point. We even had time booked at the Power Station in the event that we mastered and didn't like it. We went into Masterdisc and spent four days mastering, track by track, disc by disc, and if we felt something wasn't bright enough or prominent enough, we were able to equalize and take care of it.

Is this the last Eric Clapton box set?

I don't think there is much more. There is one project that could be done, basically of rarities—and I've got tons of them. Just because I found them doesn't mean they made it onto *Crossroads*. One is Blind Faith's "Can't Find My Way Home," an electric version. They cut it both acoustic and electric. I can build a whole compilation around that track. For *Slow Hand*, he cut "Before You Accuse Me," which I only discovered recently, and there's a whole unreleased album from the late '70s that would have come between *Backless* and *Another Ticket*. I've never heard it, but I understand that it might not be terribly strong. There's lots of live stuff. So, yeah, there's a package out there. There's a BBC live package, a Blind Faith package, a rarities package, and there's probably a live package. But I waited two years for this, and I'm going to wait again. A